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## Rhyme or Reason: That is the Question?

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## Rhyme or Reason – that is the question?

Review of *Ethics and Aesthetics of Architecture and the Environment*, a conference organised by the International Society for the Philosophy of Architecture (<http://isparchitecture.wordpress.com/>) at the School of Architecture, University of Newcastle, UK on 11-13 July 2012.

Jim Roche

Noting that “the aesthetic should not be limited merely to the way things look” the organisers of this conference sought “in part to address the discursive limitation in architecture and related subjects by broadening the aesthetic discourse beyond questions relating to purely visual phenomena in order to include those derived from all facets of human experience”.

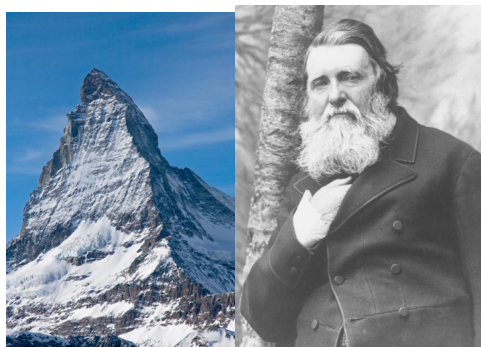
So where does ethics come in? Well, the introductory brochure noted that most philosophical trained aestheticians will say that “the aesthetic is everything” hinting perhaps of the necessity for a more haptic experience of architecture. It also drew on Wittgenstein’s quote that “ethics and aesthetics are one and the same”, and suggested questions of broader meanings that architecture has beyond purely visual stimulation, such as social or economic ideals, and their relationship to architectural form and inhabitants’ perceptions.

So we were to grapple with that eternal question – what is good, ethical architecture and environmental policy and how is this embodied in societal and cultural ethical codes?

The 3-day exploration and discussion covering three strands of architecture, landscape and practice with session themes of ‘Ethics-Aesthetics’, ‘Everyday’, ‘Phenomenology’ and ‘Culture and Politics’ was as wide, interesting and problematic as expected; sometimes obscure (for those without PhDs in philosophy), sometimes heated, sometimes both - as Kantian ‘free play’ almost came to metaphorical blows with Hegelian ‘end of art’ stuff.

This all occurred in parallel strands with as many as 21 papers being delivered in 7 different sessions over each two-hour period thus reflecting the huge international interest in this field. Hence any review will by necessity be limited to certain interests of the reviewer. Morning or evening keynote addresses were attended with eagerness by the whole group of 150 or so – which added more to our questions than helped answer the philosophical quandry.

In the opening address titled *Remaking the Matterhorn* the relationship between architecture, aesthetics, nature and geology was explored by Andrew Ballyntyne in his intriguing take on John Ruskin’s preoccupation with Mont Blanc, as described in *Modern Painters*. Ostensibly rejecting the geological studies prominent during the 1840s, Ruskin believed, at least at one stage, that he could understand the mountain by a purely picturesque study of it - that it was possible “to comprehend the visible aspect of nature” by looking at the mountain so hard he could see behind the surface of it. A peculiar obsession indeed given that he had written of its geological formation and that he had met and been influenced by Prof. James Forbes who had pointed out the correct Mont Blanc to him (he had been sketching the wrong mountain till then!).



*Mount Blanc and John Ruskin*

Ruskin's polemic shows however what Ballantyne terms his fascination with the "redemptive power of aesthetics" which he wanted to share with all people. The image of Mont Blanc, has of course long since been appropriated by popular visual culture, not least by Disney's steel construction complete with rollercoasters which Ballyntyne showed us. His talk concluded by comparing Ruskin's study of mountains and geology with some examples of modern architecture, his most intriguing being Denys Lasdun's National Theatre which, he claims, presents a series of plateaus and deep recesses to the viewer.



The National Theatre in London by architect Denys Lasdun

This stimulating talk challenged us to acknowledge the ways we interpret both the natural world and architecture by counterposing the analysis of the structure, science and materiality generated from within against what Ballyntyne terms our "appropriation in a picturesque way from without." Whether the National Theatre reminds us of mountainous landscapes or not is perhaps irrelevant, the key issue being that its true essence and value can only be understood by exploring its mysterious, spatial, cavernous form, structure and materiality from within. Prince Charles should be told.

Dr. Emily Brady's paper 'Climate change – a new set of challenges for aesthetics' explored the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in valuing environments affected by climate change. As I understood this (it was heady stuff!) - the aesthetic changes caused by climate change would create a moral challenge, which could be addressed in two categories: the 'moralist' approach where the world is aesthetically impoverished because "everything carries the stigma of climate change" and the 'autonomist' approach where we become used to change.

But humanity can surely accommodate change in aesthetic values when climate change peaks - provided we still exist that is; a more fundamental issue not addressed here.

An intense second day ended with a return to environmental philosophy and the question of value with a very accessible talk by Simon James who explored how humans might develop an appropriate relationship to the natural world. His suggestion was – “by cultivating nature’s meanings”. Not as easy as may be thought as he identified three pitfalls that many nature lovers fall into. These are *fantasy*; finding the wrong meanings in nature, *myopia*; failing to find the right ones and *anthropocentrism*; becoming preoccupied or fetishising nature’s meanings. He felt nature’s meanings can best be cultivated by Nature Writing such as J. A. Baker *The Peregrine* which captures the vivid sense of nature’s otherness, through Environmental History with Simon Schama’s *Landscape and Memory* being held up as an exemplar and through Nature Art such as that by Andy Goldsworthy which militates against romantic fantasy. For James the key issue is to recognise the “otherness of nature’s independence from romantic concerns”.

This was a kind of sketch master plan for how a better appreciation of the natural world might be reached. Acknowledging the growing hostility to the perceived cushiness of those working in the Arts and Humanities – if he means by bankers and politicians, we should not worry – he noted, in somewhat of a limp ending, that we can contribute by writing about nature’s meanings. Surely we need to do much, much more to create appreciation of and preserve the natural world and be confident of the necessity for doing so?

Dr. Ian Ground’s take on *Why does beauty matter?* acknowledged the revived interest in ‘beauty’ by philosophers and identified the various complex theses. Far too many to mention but I must look up ‘mereological reciprocity’. It moved from a myriad of ideas and references such as ‘beauties ontological promiscuity’ à la Scruton - to more commonday pronouncements like “beauty gives pleasure, which matters”. But then the question ‘why’ arises which necessitates deep examination of yet more Kantian ‘free play’. Beauty and evolution was explored by observing that the peacock’s tail has no function other than assisting the sexual selection process of attracting the hen. Maybe so but this is rather fundamental for the continuance of the species which is, well, vital if not beautiful, for peacocks.

The ‘cross-modal’ thesis was captured with an elegant phrase - “beauty is something in which we find rest and solace” which recalled many memorable architectural experiences in my favourite buildings before realising they were all houses, churches or libraries and that I was thus eliminating much of the architectural cannon where true beauty can be experienced. Or can it - outside of certain building typologies - now there’s a philosophical question?

“Mereological reciprocity” (whatever that means!) was explored through the notion of “different faces for different people” as we were presented with the contrasting faces of Samuel Beckett and David Milliband, and the fact that facial features, make a face ‘special’, though similar features can occur in other places. Lastly the ‘particularity thesis’, or the ‘love thesis’, where we are left ‘without choice’ due to a deep love, seemed a total philosophical cop-out as a well loved Beatles song came to mind. By the way, with those searing blue eyes, those deep, time-ravaged, undulating furrows - mines a Beckett anytime!

Paul Guyer gave us the Cook’s tour of philosophers from Kant and Hegel through to Burke and Ruskin whose ‘Seven Lamps’ are for Guyer a “paradigmatic synthesis and enduring benchmark for aesthetic appreciation in current architecture”. Interpreting the Power and Beauty lamp he said we should “dislike architecture that intentionally deceives us regarding the nature of its materials.” That seems a good ethical starting point. He was less complimentary of earlier philosophers though, noting that architecture was “Hegel’s poster boy for the ‘end of art’ thesis”.





*The German philosopher George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel*

A young German Hegelian in the audience challenged this interpretation. Tension permeated the hall for those in the know since the young Hegelian had earlier claimed in a parallel session that all American architecture is Hegelian, that the 9/11 attacks represented “a return of repressed violence of patriarchal law” and that “Americans should build ground level homes with generous lawns after FLW’s Broadacre City scheme” - only to be dismissed by Guyer and others as a radical romantic. Guyer’s tactful academic answer on this occasion deflected the tension.

One of the interesting practice strand sessions had Martin Duchs, as read by Stefan Koller (Holland), proffer that biomedical ethics, and in particular ‘Principlism’, could be a model for architectural ethics while Nic Coetzer (South Africa) outlined how the policy of an architecture for ‘the people’ as an armature of “ubuntu” (meaning humanism) in post apartheid South Africa, had somewhat backfired in its attempts to tackle the dehumanising affects of apartheid. He posited the “pathological ambition of the new architecture to disappear itself ... under an undescrivable weight” as he related the story of one market project which was disassembled by locals. So the 70 projects of ‘Dignified Places’ by the new South African municipalities, most of which were intended to allow additions by the people became instead, in some instances at least, sources of raw materials for the people to use in their private spaces. This episode recalled for this reviewer the armanents filled jumbo jet stripping scene in Andrew Nicoll’s *Lord of War* film as the nasty war lord, played by Nicholas Cage, sits quietly helpless on a nearby rock. It also raised a fundamental question of why end users do not always appreciate design intentions - something all practicing architects have experienced. Remember the stories of Aalto’s night-time raid to throw stones at the plastic signage on Saynatsalo Town Hall.

Both of these papers generated lively discussion around the issue of the ethics of the relationship of architects and the architectural process and product to client, end users and wider society. The medical analogy was problematic for this reviewer as it really only applies to client / architect relationships on individual focused projects such as private houses which represents a tiny fraction of architectural production. How could that model be usefully applied to urban master planning or designing huge public buildings? Other concerns raised were the usefullness of so-called ‘consultation’ by archtects with potential end users and the need for post occupancy evaluation.

This discussion recalled an argument put forward by Fran Speed in another parallel session that peoples objections, ostensibly for aesthetic reasons, to certain developments (in her example, wind farms) can in reality be motivated by concerns over ethically suspect relationships that produce experiences of ‘alienation’, ‘exclusion’ or ‘exploitation’, an argument that weighed up the importance of aesthetics against involvement / consultation of the wider community in the process. Her message was that an ethical, all inclusive relational approach may deliver a well liked work which architect, client, end user and wider community can enjoy in part because of the good memories of the process.

It could also be argued that if architecture could be treated in a more scientific, performative way and monitored, tested, analysed accordingly - which is where new environmental regulations are leading - then the experience of the results become part of a more holistic aesthetic experience, truly haptic even, that is not limited to the 'look' of something. How to ensure clients and end users can be more involved in the production of architecture is the challenge?

One session on Culture and Politics had Francesco Vitale (Italy) exploring two of Jaques Derrida's papers that focus on the 'other' and the architects responsibility of "the other yet to come" i.e. future generations. Vitale explained that Derrida explicitly called for "an architecture of the event" yet for one to resist time. The theoretical movement in architecture for which Derrida is credited (or blamed depending on ones aesthetic preferences) is Deconstruction of which Gehry and Leibiskind are two of its best known proponents. Well, curvy titanium is certainly eventful and should last the ravages of time but there are other major ethical concerns about its use.

The attempt by architects to transfer or interpret abstract literary theories into architecture has not always succeeded. Pondering this issue recalled a clever putdown to architectural Deconstruction, given by Denise Scott Brown, somebody, along with hubby Robert who was not averse to the odd theoretical flight of fancy herself, at a lecture in London in the late 1980s when she said: "Well, I think Decon might work better for urban planning than for buildings, because buildings have to keep the water out" – a valid jibe at Decon's predilection for awkward difficult to detail junctions. Derrida's concerns for "the others to come", which seemed ethically motivated as presented here, may not have been well served by the proponents of architectural Decon.

At the same session an architectural response to perceived dangers of a radical otherness was explored by Peter Mortenblock and Helge Mooshammer, in a paper titled *The Architectural Aesthetics of Counter-Terrorism*. The radical otherness in this case being possible Islamic bombers inspired by the jailed Iman of the Finsbury Park Mosque, Abu Hamza al-Masri, and the architectural response being that of the nearby newly completed Arsenal football stadium. Once centered at the heart of the community the Gunners Club ground, was a "cathedral of football" whose games had moved on from initial celebrations of "displays of the homeland" to genuine community and family celebrations so vividly captured by Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch*. Indeed this non-football enthusiast reviewer remembers the family atmosphere on winter Wednesday evenings in the early 1990s as he cycled home through throngs of supporters of all ages and gender.



*The new highly 'militarised' Arsenal football stadium in London*

The new Arsenal stadium is however a highly militarised munument to consumersim, sponsored rather ironically, by the Emirates and described by a British Government official as a "prime example of elegant counter terrorism design". The giant concrete capitalised letters spelling ARSENAL, two ultra heavy cast iron guns on garrison carriages and camouflaged concrete planters are some of the elements designed "to block vehicle borne bombs". This aesthetic deceit is only let slip in the proud but ironic naming of the fan shop as 'The Armoury'. Never has The Gunners home ground being so associated with its nickname and historical past since the club was first founded by workers at the Royal Arsenal in Wollwich in 1896.

Mortenblock and Mooshammer presented this and certain design elements of Canary Wharf as examples of the “liaison between military organisation and urban aesthetics” a kind of frenetic rush to create the ultimate defensible spaces against possible terrorist attack in the wake of 9/11, 7/7 and other attacks and perceived threats. The extent of appropriation of the architectural profession in this pursuit is further represented by the RIBA’s ‘Public Spaces – Safer Places’ student competition of 2008 in association with the Home Office and the National Counter Terrorism Security Office (NaCTSO).

**RIBA launches counter terrorism design competition**

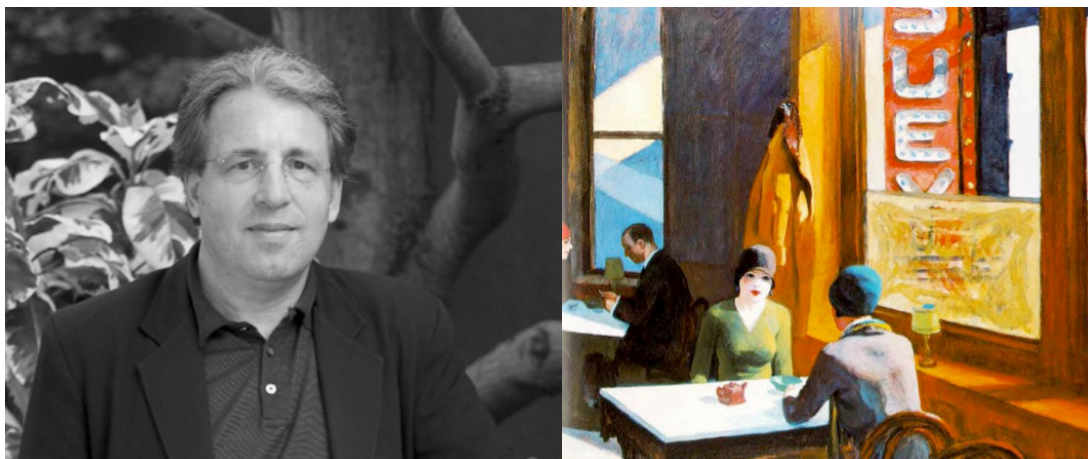
The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) today launches a new competition encouraging students to think creatively about ‘designing-in’ counter terrorist features into building blueprints.

The competition, entitled ‘Public spaces, safer places: Designing in Counter Terrorism’, intends to draw attention to the issue of counter-terrorism at the very start of the design process, for places visited and used by the public. Developed by the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA), the Home Office, the National Counter Terrorism Security Office (NaCTSO) and the RIBA, the brief asks for design responses for a public space in the aftermath of a fictitious terrorist attack scenario in the heart of a major European city.

*The RIBA announces its ‘Public Spaces – Safer Places’ student competition of 2008*

Certainly the most politicised presentation of the conference, it was a scary study of the appropriation of aesthetics in a sinister liaison between architecture and militarism. While not entirely new, such liaison will surely only lead to a creeping militarised, dystopian urban landscape that is exclusivist, alienating and ultimately counter productive. The stated aims of Governments’ interest in this architectural and planning arena - ostensibly to protect the citizenry - might be better met by a more ethical, diplomatically preventative and less aggressive foreign policy. The young German Hegelian did not agree with that suggestion noting instead that he would feel safe inside this stadium. Help!

On a less scary note David Leatherbarrow, in his ending keynote speech entitled *Sharing Sense – or how ethics might be the subject matter of architectural aesthetics*, struck a cautionary note on over reliance on technology and posited that “architecture has been brought into a technological arena with no regard to place” and that ethical considerations must “invite us to posit aesthetical solutions”. Analysing the origins of the word ‘ethos’ he posited that correct interpretation of the “habits of living that are deemed to be good”, could give us built works “of durable dimensions and expression”. For him relevant ethics could be exemplified by the shared activity of enjoying a meal – “a division of sharing and consumption” – where “table top economy represents a fairly good portrait of ethics”.



*Architect and writer David Leatherbarrow and Edward Hopper's painting Chop Suey from 1929*

Illustrating this with analysis of two examples: Hopper's painting of a restaurant scene and Sverre Fehn's only written paper - on Moroccan villages, where there is much on the ceremony of eating meals - and the dining table area of one of Fehn's designed houses, he concluded by claiming that Fehn's aesthetic shows “how we might all share in a sense of the world.”



Though thoughtful and nicely mellow as an ending presentation, and at last one of the keynote speakers talking about the materiality of a real architectural work, i.e. Fehn's house, it was limited by its focus on a domestic scenario. Leatherbarrow ended with one of the most enlightened and memorable quotes of the conference: "Design is bloody difficult – compromises are not a fall from grace. Ethos is brought into visibility ..... as the conflictual dimension of ethical decision making is at the core of the design process" – a hearty boost to all practitioners in the hall who had struggled getting their ethical design ideas (hopefully) realised in built form through all the bureaucratic and technological hoops. We could add that getting the ethical design built is even more "bloody difficult". Pure philosophers please take note!

The conference ended with brief reflections from Andrew Ballantyne supporting the final speaker's views on how houses grow around the spaces we create through generation of habit. All a bit left hanging in the air as the three female organisers were presented with bouquets of flowers by David Leatherbarrow – a nice touch for a job well done. Then it was off to lunch and a visit to historic Belsay Hall and Gardens, or for a smaller group of us, a special guided tour by Hendrik Louw of Ralph Erskine's Byker Wall Housing – a fitting return to social reality after three heady days of much consumption of idealist speculation.



*The community driven Byker Wall Housing scheme by Ralph Erskine Architect*

This conference was marvelously stimulating in its range of topics covered, the smooth running of the entire event and in the many new academic contacts made to allow ideas to develop further over time and space. Some of the other titles in the parallel sessions included: *Becoming Skin: Cultivating Interfaciality* by Mina Yaney (Austria), *Kant on Dwelling* by David Wang (USA), *Surfaces of Interiority* by Tolulope Onabolu (UK), *Landscape, Imagination and Morality* by Ian Thompson (UK), *The Gravity of Desire* by Ron Henderson (USA), *On Environmental Responsive Design; a Début de Siecle meta-ethics* by Iradj Moeni (Iran/UK) and *Cansever's Ideas on Architecture: an ontological and ethical enquiry in 20c. Turkish architecture* by Derya Yorgancioglu (Turkey). And they are just some of the ones with short titles.

While this big ideas fest with its rich multiple choice menu was stimulating on many levels a more focused programme might have allowed more communal time for deeper discussion and reflection – although it is unlikely certain conflicting philosophical interpretations would have been resolved. It seems one of the predilections of philosophers is to continually disagree with each other – politely of course. It would also have been useful to have had the practice strand addressed in the keynote speeches. Ideas are fine – but someone has to get it built.

There was much circular speculation on particular philosophical problems related to architecture and the environment without due consideration of all the agencies and facts that impinge on the problems. There was a distinct lack of reference, especially in the keynote speeches to the material, real life, practice, economics & politics (despite the promise in the brochure) and the issue of agency – as if philosophical ideas somehow exist in a hermetically sealed ideological vacuum. There was little acknowledgement that as David Mc Kay notes, in his book *Sustainability without the Hot Air* (2009) that "ethical discussions must be founded on facts".

Terry Eagleton has observed in his book *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* that “the call for an aesthetics in eighteenth-century Germany”, is among other things a response to the problem of political absolutism. Germany in that period was a parcellized territory of feudal-absolutist states, marked by a particularism and idiosyncrasy consequent on its lack of a general culture.” He thus proffers a clear connection between the development of the philosophy of aesthetics and social forces, a connection not allowed due credence at this conference.

There also seemed to be a tacit reluctance to make value judgments, the friendly Hegel / Kant feud excepting, about what exactly is ‘good’ for architecture and the environment. No ulterior motives or belief systems acknowledged as most speakers presented themselves as neutral observers. No acknowledgement of how the challenging technological developments, say in building products, ever changing computer programmes and the new noisy kid on the block - Building Innovation Modelling (BIM) - are presenting serious ethical, practical and aesthetic challenges to the production of architecture and the environment? Or of the different ways that architecture is and might be produced? Likewise of the affects on ethics and aesthetics of the current global economic uncertainty and the resultant tumultuous social struggles not least throughout Europe – both of which are impacting on the architectural profession and education?

The issues raised by this conference beg the question as to who exactly the multivariied theories of ethics and aesthetics are for and what grouping in society most influences both the ethical and aesthetic ideas of the general public? They also expose a danger that prepondering on philosophical ideas and over-reliance on aesthetic pleasure for both enlightenment and gratification will numb us into soporific passivity. As one philosopher, whose ideas were strangely absent here, given the tumultuous social times we are in, famously noted: “Philosophers have hitherto tried to understand the world; the point is to change it”.

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